

CLWYD-POWYS ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST

# newsletter

Spring 2012

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Gymraeg ar  
gael ar ein  
gwefan

# Strata Marcella — lost abbey on the banks of the Severn



With grant aid from Cadw the Trust has recently started work on trying to make sense of the humps and bumps in fields between the A483 trunk road and the banks of the Severn at Pool Quay, just to the north of Welshpool — which is all that is now visible of the former Cistercian abbey of Strata Marcella. Little is known of the abbey and its precincts apart from what was gleaned from excavations in 1890. A detailed plan of the earthworks was made in 2011 which it is hoped will be followed up by geophysical survey later this year.

**Left** Recording in progress along the eroding river bank in 2011. **Below** Aerial photograph taken by the Trust in 1988 showing the earthwork remains of the abbey on the banks of the river Severn.

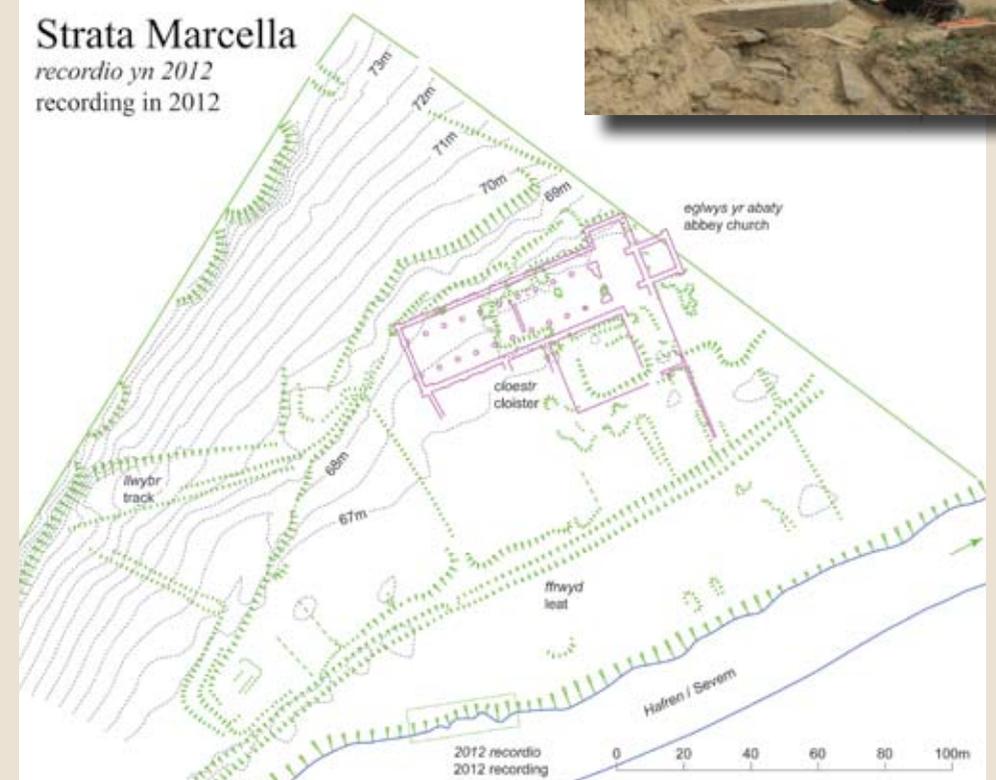


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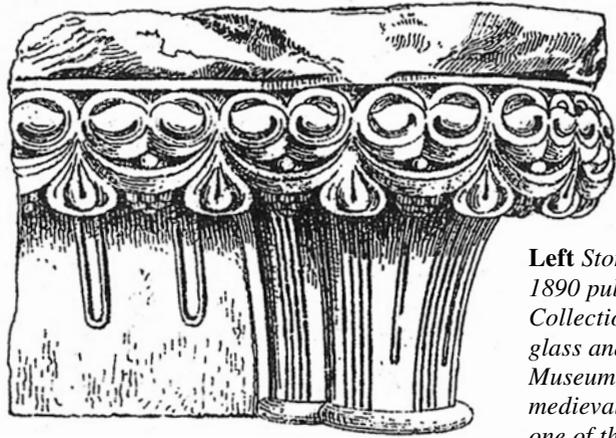
The abbey (also known by its Welsh name of Ystrad Marchell) was founded in 1170 under the patronage of Owain Cyfeiliog, prince of southern Powys, and at first housed a colony of monks sent from Whitland abbey, Carmarthenshire. Following the closure of the abbey in 1536, during the reign of Henry VIII, much of the original stonework has been robbed away and the abbey has now become all but invisible. The disappearance of the buildings — which once must have ranked alongside the abbeys of Strata Florida and Valle Crucis in splendour — represents one of the most significant losses to the architectural heritage of mid Wales.

As elsewhere within our major river valleys, there is now concern that increased flooding due to climate change will wash away parts of the site. Stone walls, ditches and gullies probably belonging to the abbey complex are becoming exposed in the eroding river bank.

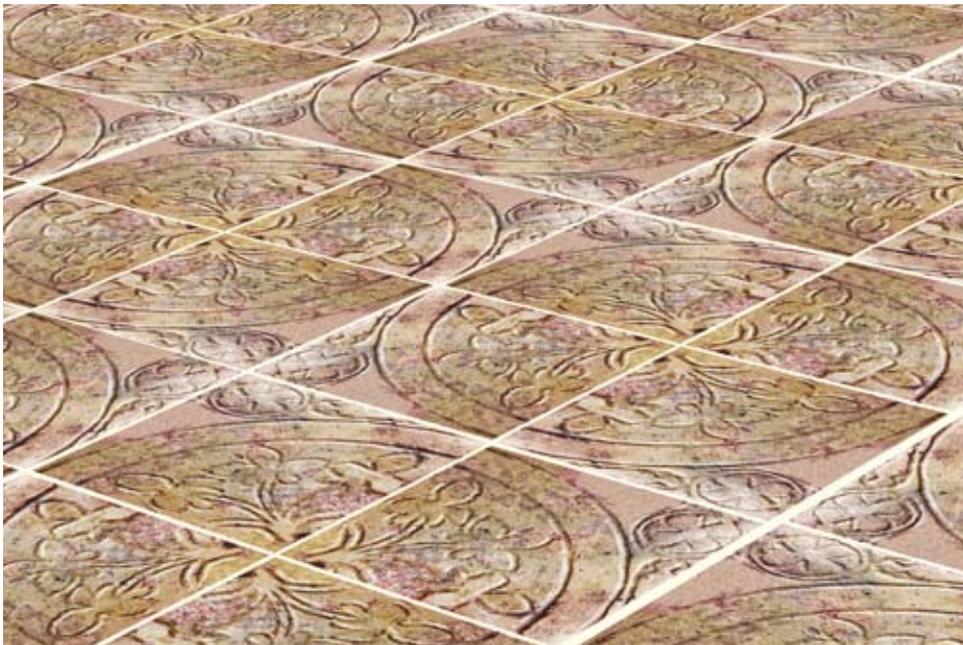
**Right** Traces of walling and gullies visible in the river bank. **Below** Plan of the visible earthworks superimposed on the plan of the abbey church.



Though little of Strata Marcella is visible today, something of its former glory can be gauged from the carved stonework, window glass and medieval floor tiles preserved in the Powysland Museum, Welshpool. A number of different medieval decorated floor tiles are known from the abbey, including those with 'line-impressed' (nos **1–3**) and 'counter-relief' decoration (no. **4**) shown opposite. The tiles were made by pressing a wooden stamp into the surface of the wet clay. Some of the tiles had individual patterns (like nos **2** and **4**) which may have been laid singly or in groups. Others were 'carpet tiles' (like no. **3**) which formed a repeating pattern, or tiles which fitted together to form a four-tile design (like no. **1**).



**Left** Stone capital from excavations in 1890 published in the *Montgomeryshire Collections*. **Above** Tangled web of window glass and leading preserved in Powysland Museum. **Below** Photo reconstruction of a medieval floor at Strata Marcella, based on one of the surviving decorated tiles.



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Many of the floor tiles found at Strata Marcella were evidently made locally at tile kilns somewhere in the Severn valley — perhaps in the area towards Shrewsbury. Identical tiles are known from other places in Montgomeryshire and Shropshire, including Newtown, Montgomery Castle, St Mary's Church Welshpool, Chirbury, and Haughmond abbey, as well as from religious sites further afield, such as Valle Crucis in Denbighshire and Strata Florida in Ceredigion.



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**1** Four-tile design with leaf pattern set within circle (see reconstruction on facing page). **2** Griffin (a mythical creature with the head and wings of an eagle and the body of a lion). **3** Carpet-pattern tile with oak leaves set within square. **4** Complex design showing a man standing below an arched canopy and between two trees, contemplating himself in a hand-held mirror. The man's medieval costume — with buttoned tunic, long dangling sleeves, long-tailed hood (known as a *liripipe*) and purse on his belt — suggests a date after about 1340. Photos reproduced by courtesy of the Powysland Museum, Welshpool.



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# Giant prehistoric rings in the Welsh borderland

Several hundred cropmark ring-ditches have been discovered by aerial photography in Wales, mostly in the major river valleys. These are generally under about 20 metres in diameter and in many cases are thought to have encircled prehistoric round barrows. Some of these have been excavated and shown to be Neolithic or Bronze Age burial monuments that have been levelled by centuries of ploughing.

Little is known, however, about a distinctive group of under 20 much larger ring-ditches — often over 35 or 40 metres in diameter — which have been mostly discovered along the Welsh borderland. It was unclear whether these represent different kinds of burial monument or whether they had some other purpose.

In our Autumn 2010 *Newsletter* we heralded the start of a project designed to find out more about this group of larger ring-ditches, as a follow-up to the survey of Welsh prehistoric burial and ritual monuments sponsored by Cadw. With the goodwill of local landowners we have now been able to look at six of these giant ring-ditches in an attempt to find out more about what kind of monument they represent and when they were built.

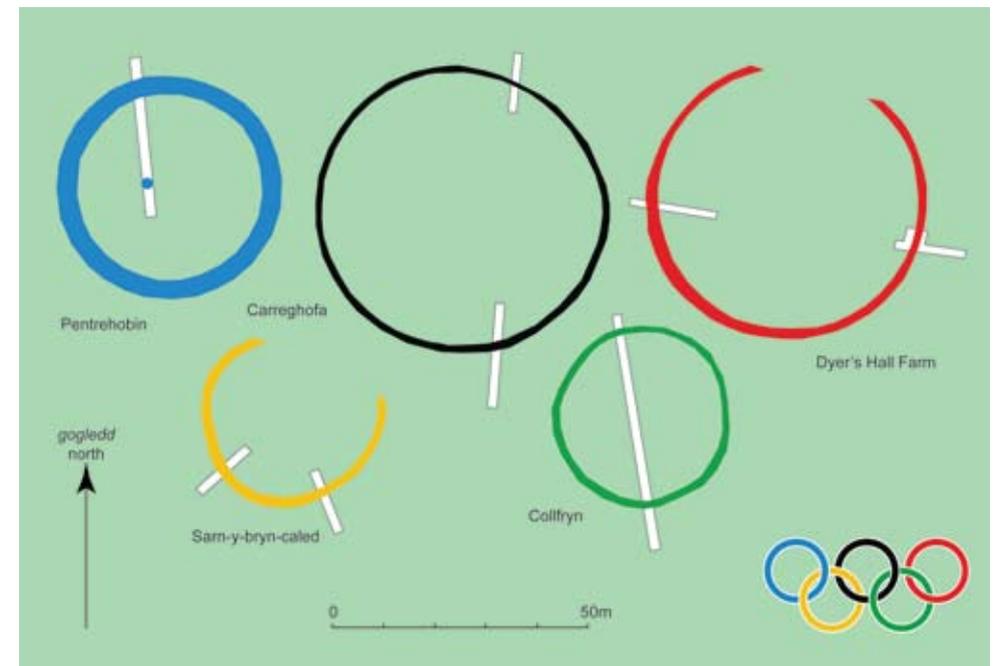
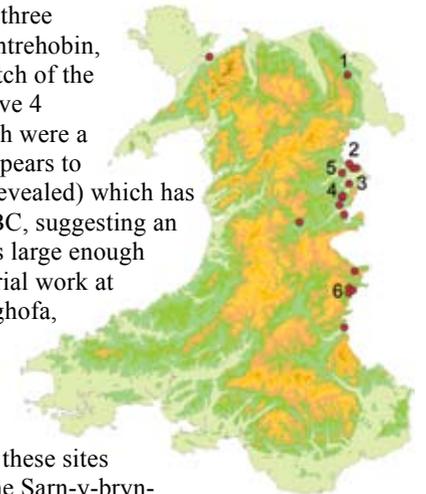


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**Above** Prehistoric cropmark sites at Sarn-y-bryn-caled, alongside the A483 south of Welshpool, visible in fields of ripening corn. **1** Giant ring-ditch. **2** Normal-sized ring-ditch. **3** End of Neolithic cursus. **Right** Section across the giant ring-ditch at Sarn-y-bryn-caled during excavation in early 2012.



The results of the project suggest that perhaps two or three different types of monument are represented. At **1** Pentrehobin, in the valley of the river Alyn in Denbighshire, the ditch of the 44-metre diameter ring-ditch was found to be a massive 4 metres wide and well over 2 metres deep, inside which were a number of features including a pit containing what appears to be a large oak coffin (of which only the surface was revealed) which has produced a radiocarbon date of between 2400–2130 BC, suggesting an Early Bronze Age burial monument. Here, the ditch is large enough to have formed at least a low central burial mound. Trial work at four sites in the river Severn catchment — at **2** Carreghofa, **3** Dyer's Hall, **4** Sarn-y-bryn-caled, and **5** Collfryn (which vary between 35–55 metres in diameter) — revealed much slighter ditches, generally less than about a metre deep, which seem likely to have been used to build no more than a low inner bank. None of these sites have yet been dated though it seems significant that the Sarn-y-bryn-caled ring-ditch forms part of the well-known complex here of both Neolithic and Bronze Age ritual monuments. The true 'Olympian' amongst these giant ring-ditches, however, remains **6** Walton Court ring-ditch in Radnorshire, described in our Autumn 2010 *Newsletter* (see also page 14 in this issue). This massive 98-metre diameter ring-ditch — its ditch 2 metres wide and up to 1.4 metres deep and with hints of an entrance causeway on one side — is reminiscent of the early bank and ditch enclosing Stonehenge. It has produced a radiocarbon date of 2570–2300 BC, suggesting that it was built hundreds of years later, however, during the later Neolithic to early Bronze Age transition period.



# Royal Jubilees . . . hillforts, maps and beacons



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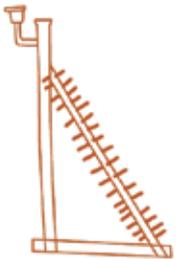
**Right** Aerial view of the Trust's hillfort at Beacon Ring on Long Mountain, taken in 2008

As noted in previous *Newsletters* the Trust owns the Iron Age hillfort of Beacon Ring (or in Welsh, Caer Digoll) on the summit of Long Mountain in Montgomeryshire. The middle of the hillfort was planted with trees in 1953 set out in the monogram EIIR to commemorate the Queen's Coronation. The letters stand for 'Elizabeth II Regina' which are also seen in abbreviation on coins of the realm.

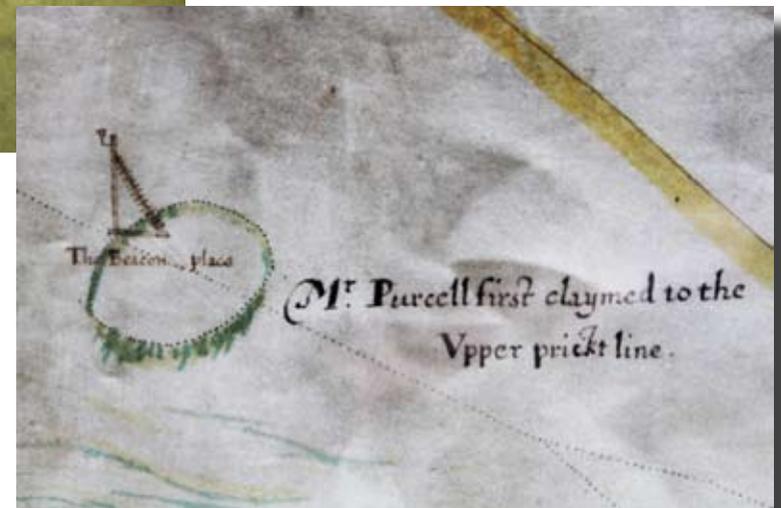
Sixty years later, in the year of the Queen's Diamond Jubilee, the plantation obviously has a new and special significance, but it also brings home the fact that the trees have now reached maturity and will shortly need to be felled, before they start blowing over and causing damage to the Iron Age hillfort. We are hoping, over the course of the next few years, to return the hillfort to grassland again and to make it more fully accessible to visitors.

Beacons are no longer permitted on the site because of the damage that would be caused to the buried archaeology.

In our Autumn 2010 *Newsletter*, we mentioned that the last beacon that had been lit at Beacon Ring was in June 1887, long before the present trees were planted, in celebration of Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee (50 years). Our continuing research into the history of the hillfort has turned up some new and interesting information. The earliest reference to a beacon that we have so far been able to find is on a map of the Leighton Estate in 1663 which shows a pole with a fire-basket and ladder at what is called 'The Beacon place'. Tared rope was usually burnt in iron fire baskets of this kind as a signal at times of emergency. The plan of the Beacon Ring hillfort shown on this map is possibly the earliest depiction of a hillfort in Wales.



*Extract of map by William Fowler, dated 1663 showing Beacon Ring. Reproduced with permission of Powis Estates and Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru – National Library of Wales.*



# The Sword in the Tree !

The Trust is often asked to identify artefacts that have just been found or have been sitting in a cupboard or on the mantelpiece for a while. Normally, these are old coins that have been lost, or sherds of pottery from pots that have broken and been thrown away, though sometimes it's things like the hoard of Roman coins deliberately buried near Montgomery reported in our Autumn 2011 *Newsletter*. As well as helping to identify what things are we also try to make sure that older finds at least are entered on to the Portable Antiquities Scheme database (online at [www.finds.org.uk](http://www.finds.org.uk)) which records a photograph of the find together with a brief description, dating, and details of where it was found.

Usually, it's fairly explicable why things have been found where they are — where they have been lost, thrown away or buried. But occasionally the find-spot is difficult to explain. This is certainly the case with the sword found 'about fifty years ago' in a hollowed-out tree trunk on the banks of the river Severn near Trewern recently reported to us. We have been able to identify it as a French heavy cavalry sword of a type used during the period between 1800–1820. Possibly, like many others, it was brought back to this country as a trophy from the Napoleonic Wars. On the other hand it may have remained in the possession of the captured French army officer who owned it: they were apparently permitted to retain their swords, even in captivity. French prisoners of war were billeted at a number of places locally including, for example, the former bakery on the junction between Church Street and Broad Street in Welshpool, even though it is said at the same time to have had a gunpowder store and munitions factory next door!

However the sword made its way to mid Wales, the intriguing question is how or why it ended up hidden in a tree on the river bank?



*French cavalry sword found in a tree near Trewern, dating to 1800–1820.*

# Space-time continuity around the source of the Hindwell Brook

The first episode of the recent BBC Wales series *The Story of Wales* screened earlier in the year featured Huw Edwards walking through oak woodland as posts of the Neolithic Hindwell palisaded enclosure spring magically into view (see below). The CGI reconstruction of this amazing enclosure in eastern Radnorshire was the result of collaboration between the production company and the Trust. Small-scale excavations at the site have shown that the enclosure — built by a combination of stone and flint tools and human effort in about 2800 BC — encompassed an area of about 34 hectares. It was bounded by up to 1400 oak posts up to a metre in diameter, standing 4–5 metres high, and spaced about 2 metres apart. Even more remarkably, however, recent work by the Trust has shown that the Hindwell enclosure formed just a part of a complex of Neolithic timber and earth enclosures which radiocarbon dating has shown were built in the Walton basin during a period of over a millennium between about 3800 and 2500 BC, clustered around the source of the Hindwell Brook.



“ The people who inhabit this land are making some big statements. Here in Wales we have discovered one of the largest timber constructions anywhere in Europe from that age. Thousands of trees are cut down in order to build it. And it tells us that these are people with complex needs. People who want to make their mark on the world. ” Huw Edwards, *The Story of Wales*.

## Palisaded enclosures in the Walton basin

Recent work undertaken with the help of grant aid from Cadw has shown that there were at least three Neolithic palisaded enclosures close to each other in the Walton basin, dating to the period about 2800 BC. The enclosures were all built of large upright timbers but each had been constructed in a slightly different way. The Walton enclosure **1** had more widely-spaced posts set in separate pits with post ramps. The Hindwell enclosure **2** was built of less widely-spaced posts set in intercutting pits, again with post-ramps. The Hindwell double-palisaded **3** enclosure was built of close-set posts set in continuous foundation trenches. At present it's unclear whether the enclosures were all standing at the same time or whether they were built one after the other. Their purpose is also still uncertain though it seems significant that they are clustered around the source of the Hindwell Brook at Hindwell Pool. The pool is fed by springs which rise up here on the eastern side of the basin all year round, unlike the Summergil Brook (the principal stream crossing the basin) which dries up in summer. See the plan on page 14 for other monuments forming part of this remarkable Neolithic complex.



**Top** The Summergil Brook in summer when (true to name) it has dried up. **Middle** The Summergil Brook in winter, when water from Radnor hills runs freely. **Bottom** Hindwell Pool, fed by springs all year round except in the driest of summers.



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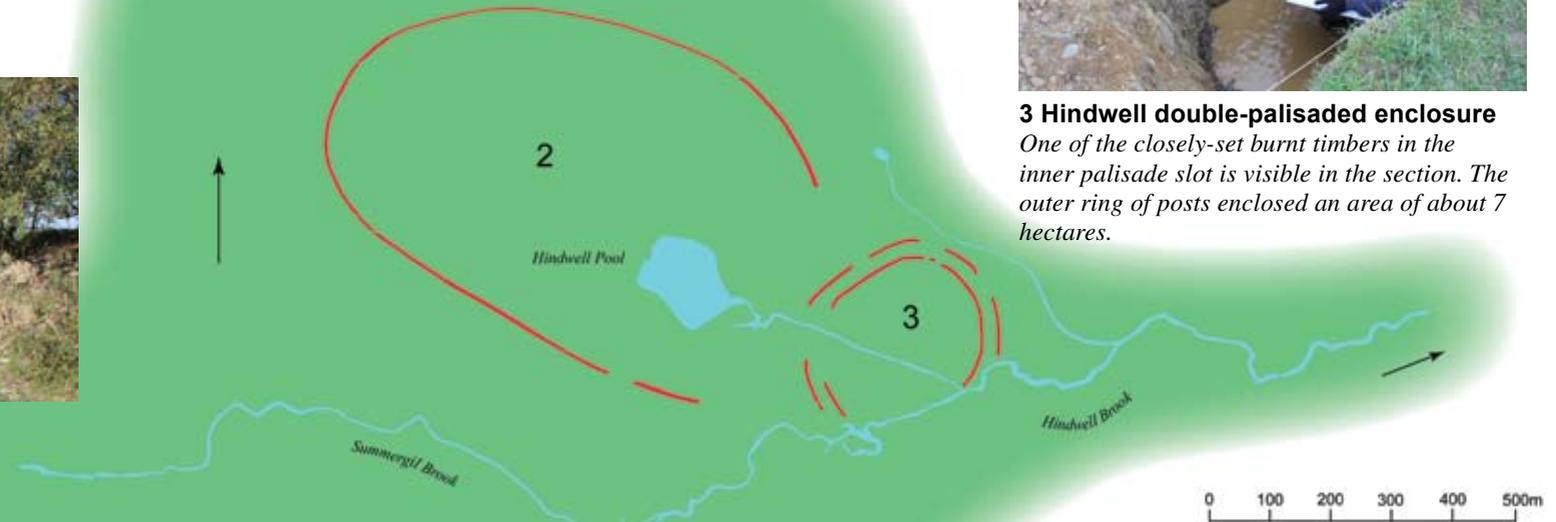
## 2 Hindwell palisaded enclosure

The position of four spaced charred oak timbers are visible, set in intercutting pits. Ramps to the left enabled the posts to be raised. The posts enclosed an area of about 34 hectares.



## 3 Hindwell double-palisaded enclosure

One of the closely-set burnt timbers in the inner palisade slot is visible in the section. The outer ring of posts enclosed an area of about 7 hectares.



## 1 Walton enclosure

One of the pits for the widely spaced posts of the enclosure, with its ramp on the near side. The timbers enclosed an area of over 5 hectares.

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# Bob Jones — in memoriam

In January Bob Jones tragically died in an air crash on Long Mountain near Welshpool. Bob, who was the driving force behind the establishment of the Mid Wales Airfield near Welshpool in 1990, had for many years acted as pilot to aerial archaeologists in Wales and the West Midlands, helping to discover and record many new sites from the air.

Bob loved flying, it was his passion. Another of Bob's interests was history and archaeology, but more than that he became an invaluable member of the aerial archaeology fraternity. Although initially just acting as the pilot for aerial photographers, his interest and skill as a pilot became a much valued asset. Those who flew with Bob could rely not only on his ability to position the aircraft in the best place for taking a photograph, but also on the way he helped to identify new sites which might be of archaeological interest.

Bob's flying career was by no means limited to archaeology and this gave him the perfect opportunity of keeping a watchful eye over large parts of the country, particularly in early summer when cropmarks start to form. In this way he was responsible for making a number of new archaeological discoveries, including the previously unknown Neolithic cursus at Dyffryn Lane, near Berriew (shown overleaf)



**Above** The remarkable complex of Neolithic enclosures in the Walton basin, east of New Radnor. **1** Walton palisaded enclosure. **2** Hindwell palisaded enclosure. **3** Hindwell double-palisaded enclosure. **4** Womaston causewayed enclosure. **5** Hindwell cursus. **6** Walton cursus. **7** Walton Court ring-ditch. **Right** Reconstruction of the Walton palisaded enclosure.



Recent work by the Trust has shown that the palisaded enclosures in the Walton basin form part of a remarkable complex of Neolithic monuments probably built at different times during the period between 3800–2500 BC, including two long ditched enclosures known as cursus monuments, a large ring-ditch almost 100m in diameter, and a causewayed enclosure, all reported in earlier *Newsletters* (see the Spring 2009 and Autumn 2010 and Autumn 2011 issues). The precise purpose of the enclosures remains uncertain but the considerable time and effort that would have been involved in their construction suggests that they represent tribal centres at which large numbers of people met — perhaps at certain times of year — to take part in social or ceremonial gatherings. The clustering of these monuments around the source of the Hindwell Brook may have had some ritual significance.



Images from the BBC series *Britain's Heritage Heroes*, broadcast shortly after Bob's death. **Above** with aerial archaeologist Neil Rimmington of Herefordshire Archaeology. **Right** The high-wing Cessna favoured by aerial photographers.





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which he spotted in late June 2009. His flying skills and archaeological interests led to his involvement in a number television programmes, such as the BBC Wales series *Hidden Histories*. His last appearance was in a programme in the BBC series *Britain's Heritage Heroes*, broadcast in February 2012, dedicated to his memory.

Bob was a great friend to all who knew him, and aerial archaeologists in Wales and the border counties have truly lost one of their own. It is perhaps a fitting tribute that the book *Montgomeryshire Past & Present from the Air* by Chris Musson was published jointly by the Trust and the Powysland Club last year. The quality of many of the images in the book is due in no small measure to Bob's expertise and will bring back many memories for those who flew with him.

*The Trust is grateful to all the landowners who granted permission to carry out the projects on their land described in the Newsletter and for grant aid from Cadw on behalf of the Welsh Government.*



Llywodraeth Cymru  
Welsh Government



The *Newsletter* can be downloaded from [www.cpat.org.uk/news/newslets/newslets.htm](http://www.cpat.org.uk/news/newslets/newslets.htm)

**Front cover:** Crouching lion on medieval floor tile from Strata Marcella abbey, Pool Quay. *By courtesy of Powysland Museum, Welshpool.*

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